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Mountains Beyond Mountains Summary

Mountains Beyond Mountains by Tracy Kidder is a chronicle of the life and work of Dr. Paul Farmer. Farmer is a one-of-a-kind doctor, who spends his entire life trying to eliminate poverty and provide healthcare for the poor. Farmer works to serve people in countries like Haiti, Peru and Russia to ultimately end infectious disease and bring lifesaving medicine to people who have no access to it, but need it the most. A huge theme in *Mountains Beyond Mountains* is the idea of “the long defeat.” Farmer has devoted his life to winning over “the long defeat,” because he realizes that his goal of changing the conditions of extremely poor countries may be farfetched, but he will never go a day without trying to make progress. His hard work to eliminate poverty and illness is what makes him a great person, and as his patients like to call him, a “saint.”

Farmer’s heart and soul is dedicated to the people of Haiti, where he runs an organization called “Zanmi Lasante”, or Partners in Health. When he first came to Cange, Haiti, where “Zanmi Lasante” is located, he described, what seemed to him, the end of the earth. However, Farmer has created a miracle in the poorest part of one of the poorest countries in the world. There are tall trees, walkways, an ambulatory clinic, a women’s clinic, a general hospital, a church, a building to treat tuberculosis and even a kitchen that prepares meals for over 2000 people a day. “Zanmi Lasante” is funded through a public charity in Boston that Farmer founded, called Partners in Health, as well as a few generous hospitals and individuals that donate drugs and charitable contributions. Farmer himself works as a Doctor and Professor at Harvard Medical Center and donates almost all of his time and salary to the people of Haiti. He spends about 40% of the year in Boston working for Harvard, and the rest in Haiti and other poverty ridden countries around the world.

While Farmer is loved by his patients and is often brought gifts like pigs or chickens for his efforts, he is only motivated by the thought that there is some patient in need. He is constantly interrupted by medical emergencies, even when he is not expecting patients. For example, one night Farmer was studying in Haiti and a young girl came to his door on donkey ambulance in desperate need for a spinal tap. During the procedure the girl cried out that she was hungry and Farmer thought to himself, “Only in Haiti would a child cry out that she’s hungry during a spinal tap” (Kidder 32). Due to incidences like this, farmer feels guilty that someone may be dying without his help, and thus, seldom sees his healthy wife and daughter.

Although Farmer is truly in love with Haiti, he is also in love with helping the poor all over the world. Farmer’s charity, Partners in Health, becomes a player in international health as it models similar programs after “Zanmi Lasante” in Peru and Russia to help fight Tuberculosis. The treatment for tuberculosis is tricky and because many doctors in developing countries are not provided proper training, patients often form multidrug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB). Farmer and his business partner Jim Kim tried to convince the World Health Organization (WHO) to adopt new prescriptions for dealing with MDR-TB, and after years of resistance due to high cost and the disbelief that the disease was serious enough for intervention, the WHO agreed. Along with many more success, specifically in “Zanmi Lasante,” Farmer has changed the world. Through his love for medicine and anthropology, he is winning “the long defeat.”

This book has made me change the way I see the world, mainly because Farmer teaches the lesson that there is a link between poverty and poor health. Many people have no access to any type of healthcare, and thus a multitude of preventable illnesses and deaths occur. Farmer decided to dedicate his life to helping the poor at an early age, which reinforces the point we discussed last class, that anyone can make a difference in this world, at any age, if he or she is passionate enough. However, I feel that Farmer's character is very rare, as he basically dropped everything, including his family, to help the poor in other countries. Nonetheless, Farmer is a very admirable person.